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SUBJECT: TELESUR DEBUTS WITH MUCH FANFARE, LITTLE PROGRAMMING

SENSITIVE

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) THE MUCH-AWAITED LAUNCH OF TELESUR, THE REGIONAL TELEVISION STATION HATCHED BY VENEZUELAN PRESIDENT HUGO CHAVEZ-WITH NOMINAL COOPERATION FROM ARGENTINA, BRASIL, CUBA, AND URUGUAY-OCCURRED ON SUNDAY, JULY 24. THE INITIAL BROADCAST ORIGINATED FROM A THEATER IN CARACAS WHERE SELECT INVITED MEMBERS OF THE DIPLOMATIC CORPS HAD GATHERED TO WATCH WHAT AMOUNTED TO A NEARLY FOUR HOUR TALK SHOW, INTERSPERSED WITH VIDEO CLIPS FROM AROUND THE CONTINENT. IN A RELATIVELY SHORT CALL-IN, VENEZUELAN PRESIDENT HUGO CHAVEZ FRIAS CLAIMED THAT THE STATION WILL MAINTAIN ITS INDEPENDENCE AND WILL NOT BE CONTROLLED BY ANY GOVERNMENT. THOUGH FEATURING A MOTLEY COLLECTION OF LEFT-LEANING PHILOSOPHERS, ARTISTS AND JOURNALISTS FROM THE REGION AND AROUND THE WORLD, WITH THE ATTENDENT VIEWS EXPRESSED, THE BROADCAST'S ANTI-AMERICANISM WAS LIGHT WHEN COMPARED TO MANY "ALO PRESIDENTE" BROADCASTS. THE PRODUCERS SEEMED TO HAVE MADE A SELF-CONSCIOUS EFFORT NOT TO SEEM LIKE AN OVERTLY "ALL-CHAVEZ" STATION. END SUMMARY.

ON WITH THE SHOW

2. (U) THE INITIAL BROADCAST WAS TRANSMITTED VIA SATELLITE AND WAS THEORETICALLY AVAILABLE TO VIEWERS IN ALL OF THE AMERICAS AS WELL AS EUROPE. TO RECEIVE THE SIGNAL, HOWEVER, REQUIRED A LATEST TECHNOLOGY DIGITAL DECODER. (PAS CARACAS HAD TO BORROW ONE IN ORDER TO DECIPHER THE SIGNAL.) SUCH EXTRAORDINARY MEASURES WERE NOT NEEDED FOR THE AVERAGE VENEZUELAN VIEWER. THE MAJOR SATELLITE PROVIDER (DIRECTTV) PERMANENTLY ALLOCATED A SPACE FOR THE CHANNEL ON THEIR VENEZUELAN SERVICE, WHILE THE MAJOR CARACAS CABLE PROVIDER "BORROWED" THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY CHANNEL FOR THE BROADCAST, WHILE WORKING TO FIND ANOTHER PERMANENT SLOT FOR TELESUR. OTHER SMALLER CABLE OPERATORS ALSO CARRIED THE TRANSMISSION. WHILE TELESUR IS SUPPOSED TO BE PERMANENTLY PLACED ON CHANNEL 11 (ON THE OPEN BROADCAST SPECTRUM), THE TEST BROADCAST WAS ONLY AVAILABLE IN ITS ENTIRETY ON ONE OPEN CHANNEL, VTV CHANNEL 8 (THE STATE TELEVISION CHANNEL).

3. (U) INTERNATIONALLY, IT SEEMS FEW VIEWERS WERE ABLE TO WITNESS THE LAUNCH. EMBASSIES IN PERU, BRAZIL, CHILE, ECUADOR, COLOMBIA, AND CUBA REPORTED LITTLE OR NO COVERAGE, WHILE BOLIVIA AND URUGUAY REPORTED THAT ONE STATION IN EACH TRANSMITTED AN HOUR OF PROGRAMMING. STATE TV IN ARGENTINA APPEARS TO HAVE BEEN THE MOST INTERESTED, REPORTEDLY TRANSMITTING THREE OF THE FOUR HOURS.

4. (U) THE BROADCAST, WHICH BEGAN 16 MINUTES LATE, LEAVING MANY IN SUSPENSE ABOUT THE CAUSE AND LENGTH OF THE DELAY, ORIGINATED FROM THE TERESA CARRENO THEATER, ONE OF CARACAS' QJOR PERFORMING ARTS CENTERS. THE SET WAS A SEMI-CIRCULAR TABLE FEATURING THE APPROXIMATELY 35 PRESENT MEMBERS OF THE "ADVISORY COUNCIL" AND ANCHORED BY THEN VENEZUELAN MINISTER OF COMMUNICATIONS (HE HAS SINCE RESIGNED THAT POST) AND TELESUR PRESIDENT ANDRES IZARRA AND TELESUR DIRECTOR GENERAL ARAM AHARONIAN. THE LATTER TWO EACH GAVE A SET OF OPENING REMARKS, FOLLOWED BY COMMENTS FROM NUMEROUS ADVISORY BOARD MEMBERS. THE BOARD IS COMPOSED OF (SOME WELL KNOWN) ACTIVISTS, ARTISTS, AND JOURNALISTS FROM LATIN AMERICA, EUROPE, AND THE UNITED STATES. FOUR AMERICAN BOARD MEMBERS WERE PRESENT, INCLUDING ACTOR DANNY GLOVER, WHO IN THE PAST HAS PUBLICLY SUPPORTED PRESIDENT CHAVEZ. OTHER NOTABLE MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL INCLUDE: PAKISTANI FILMMAKER AND

WRITER TARIQ ALI, NICARAGUAN ERNESTO CARDENAL, ENTERTAINER HARRY BELEFONTE, AND BRAZILIAN FILM DIRECTOR WALTER SALLES (THE LAST TWO WERE NOT PRESENT). DESPITE SOME OF THE MARQUIS NAMES, THOUGH, MOST ARE LESS WELL-KNOWN FACES. ALI MADE PERHAPS THE MOST NOTABLE COMMENTS WHEN HE RECOUNTED HOW A U.S. GENERAL IN DOHA HAD BURST INTO AL-JAZEERA'S HEADQUARTERS DEMANDING AN APOLOGY FOR VIDEO THEY WERE RUNNING OF THE AFTERMATH OF A U.S. TANK

ATTACK ON A CARLOAD OF IRAQI CIVILIANS, AND HOW IMPORTANT IT IS FOR THE WORLD NOT TO ALLOW THE U.S. POINT OF VIEW TO DOMINATE THE MEDIA DISCOURSE.

REGIONAL INTEGRATION, OR IDEOLOGICAL INDOCTRINATION?

15. U) PRESIDENT CHAVEZ, APPARENTLY AT PAINS TO NOT FA CRITICISM OF TELESUR AS HIS OWN VESSEL, DID NOT APPEAR IN PERSON NOR ON VIDEO DURING THE BROADCASTS. HE WAS SEEN JUST BLOCKS AWAY AN HOUR EARLIER AT A COMMEMORATION CEREMONY MARKING SIMON BOLIVAR' BIRTHDAY, AND HOURS LATER AT A MUSIC FESTIVAL I ANOTHER PART OF CARACAS. ALMOST THREE HOURS INTO THE BROADCAST, CHAVEZ CALLED-IN TO GIVE HIS REGARDS. DURING THE CALL, WHICH LASTED ONLY 19 MINUTE, CHAVEZ PROMISED THE STATION WOULD BE INDEPENDENT. HE ALSO SAID VENEZUELAN AMBASSADOR TO THE U.S BERNARDO ALVAREZ HAD ASSURED HIM THAT THOUSANDS WERE WATCHING IN THE UNITED STATES (APPARENTLY INCLUDING PRESIDENT BUSH, WHO CHAVEZ SAID WAS "GLUED TO HIS TV"), WHILE FIDEL CASTRO TOO WAS VIEWING FROM HAVANA. (NOTE: CASTRO MAY HAVE BEEN WATCHING VIA A SPECIAL FEED, BUT THE BROADCAST APPEARS NOT TO HAVE BEEN AVAILABLE TO CUBAN VIEWERS). CHAVEZ AID THE PROJECT, WHICH HE CLAIMS TO HAVE BEEN FORMULATING FOR THE PAST SIX YEARS, IS A "HOMERUN" OR-MORE APPROPRIATELY FOR THE MAJORITY OF THE CONTINENT-A "GOAL."

16. (U) THEN VENEZUELAN COMMUNICATIONS MINISTER AND TELESUR PRESIDENT ANDRES IZARRA HAILED THE STATION AS THE BEGINNING OF A NEW INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATIONS ORDER, A COUNTERWEIGHT TO A GLOBAL NEOLIBERALISM WHICH, ACCORDING TO THE MINISTER, IS A THREAT TO LATIN CULTURES. IZARRA WENT ON TO SAY, "TELESUR IS AGAINST THE OLIGARCHIES OF OUR COUNTRIES AND THEIR ASSOCIATES IN THE NORTH. TELESUR IS AGAINST CULTURAL IMPERIALISM, AGAINST IMPERIALISM IN ALL FORMS. IT IS NOT AGAINST THE AMERICAN PEOPLE, AS SOME HAVE SAID, WHICH IS PROVED BY OUR AMERICAN ADVISORS."

17. (U) ONE CURIOUS ASPECT OF THE BROADCAST WAS THE LANGUAGE BARRIER. THE TWO PRESENTERS DURING THE BROADCAST TOOK TURNS SPEAKING IN SPANISH AND PORTUGUESE, THOUGH NOT REPEATING THE SAME INFORMATION, MEANING ONE TOOK DIFFERENT INFORMATION AWAY FROM THE EXPERIENCE DEPENDING ON ONE'S LINGUA FRANCA. ANOTHER UNUSUAL ASPECT WAS THE SOUND OF BRAZILIAN REPORTERS SPEAKING HEAVILY-ACCENTED SPANISH, LEAVING THE VIEWER UNCERTAIN ABOUT WHICH LANGUAGE THEY WERE ACTUALLY HEARING. THIS PROBLEM LED TO SOME JOKING AMONGST THE PRESENTERS AND GUESTS ABOUT THE NEED TO LEARN PORTUGUESE, OR AT LEAST, "PORTUGUESE." THIS ISSUE RAISES SERIOUS QUESTIONS FOR TELESUR, IN THAT THEY MUST DEVISE AN EFFECTIVE WAY TO BROADCAST BILINGUALLY. PREVIOUS COMMENTS HAVE INDICATED THEY EXPECT TO USE PORTUGUESE SUBTITLES, HOWEVER, THAT MAY PROVE TO BE DIFFICULT AND COSTLY, ESPECIALLY WITH LIVE BROADCASTS.

ALL THE "NEWS" THAT'S FIT TO AIR

18. (U) FOLLOWING THE INITIAL FOUR HOUR BROADCAST, TELESUR REVERTED TO ITS FALL-BACK PROGRAMMING, WHICH HAS BEEN PROMOTIONS AND VIDEO CLIPS OF CULTURALLY-FOCUSED FEATURES. ONE NEW ADDITION, THOUGH, WAS THE "TELESUR

NEWSCAST," WHICH UNLIKE A TRADITIONAL NEWS PROGRAM, WAS JUST A SERIES OF NON-TIMELY (NOT HEADLINE-BASED) NEWS FEATURES. THESE ALL INCLUDED A LEFTIST SLANT AND SOME HAD AN OVERTLY ANTI-U.S. BIAS. TOPICS COVERED IN THESE TYPICALLY FOUR TO FIVE MINUTE REPORTS, WERE:
-POST-COUP HAITI (CHAOS, HIGH UNEMPLOYMENT, AND EXPLOITATION OF HAITIAN WORKERS BY WESTERN ORGANIZATIONS, THE LATEST FEATURING VIDEO OF "USA" MARKED SUPPLY BAGS AS ITS VISUAL).
-DISPLACED COLOMBIANS LIVING IN SQUALID CONDITIONS ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF BOGOTA (WITH NO MENTION OF HOW THEY BECAME DISPLACED, I.E. BECAUSE OF INSURGENTS).
-CARACAS PROTESTS AGAINST MURDERS OF POOR SQUATTERS/FARMERS (GIVEN EARLIER IN THE WEEK BY THE VENEZUELAN VICE PRESIDENT AS AN EXAMPLE OF THE DEATHS THAT THE PRIVATE MEDIA DON'T CARE ABOUT, TO DEFLECT CRITICISM OF THE POLICE MASSACRE OF STUDENTS IN CARACAS).
-THE AWARDED OF THE OLYMPICS TO LONDON, WITH MENTION OF HOW NEGLECTED LATIN AMERICA IS IN THIS REGARD, AND FEATURING A QUOTE FROM THE VENEZUELAN VICE MINISTER OF SPORTS CRITICISING THE CHOICE OF LONDON BECAUSE OF THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT'S PARTICIPATION IN THE IRAQ WAR, WHICH HE TERMED CONTRARY TO THE OLYMPIC SPIRIT.
-MOST IMPORTANTLY, A STORY ABOUT 400 U.S. MARINES LANDING IN PARAGUAY TO, AS THEY QUOTE FROM BOLPRESS, "NO DOUBT HEAD TO THE TRIPLE BORDER WHERE THE U.S WANTS TO ESTABLISH A BASE," WHICH, ACCORDING TO THE TELESUR NARRATOR, "CALLS OUR ATTENTION GIVEN THAT THE RIVER IS ONE OF THE GREATEST SOURCES OF FRESH WATER" IN THE

REGION. THIS REPORT ALSO MAKES MENTION OF THE IMMUNITY FROM PROSECUTION AND FROM THE INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL COURT BUILT INTO THE DEPLOYMENT AGREEMENT.

COMMENT

19. (SBU) WHILE IT APPEARS TELESUR WILL NOT BE ALL CHAVEZ, ALL THE TIME, CHAVEZ'S PET ISSUES WILL DEFINITELY BE THE FOCUS OF MUCH PROGRAMMING. GIVEN ITS BASE IN CARACAS, ITS STAFF, ITS FUNDING (51% VENEZUELAN), AND ITS PRESIDENT, IT WOULD BE SAFE TO ASSUME THAT THE VIEWER CAN EXPECT MORE OF THE SAME WHEN IT COMES TO COMMENTARY AND "NEWS." THAT BEING SAID, CARE SHOULD BE TAKEN NOT TO DEMONIZE THE VERY EXISTENCE OF THE CHANNEL, WHICH DOES FEATURE SOME VALUABLE CULTURAL ASPECTS AND IS BOUND TO AWAKEN SOME REGIONAL/CONTINENTAL IDENTITY IN VIEWERS. TO PUBLICLY VIEW THE ENTIRE ENTERPRISE AS THREATENING WOULD BE TO FALL INTO A TRAP WHICH CONFIRMS THE U.S. WANTS NOTHING MORE THAN TO DOMINATE THE PUBLIC DISCOURSE AND DEVALUES THE UNIQUE CULTURAL IDENTITY OF THE REGION. TELESUR SUPPORTERS AND GOV OFFICIALS HAVE ALREADY COMMENTED THAT THE RECENT CONGRESSIONAL AMMENDMENT ADDRESSING THE STATION IS PROOF THAT IT IS A THREAT TO THE U.S.'S DOMINATION OF THE REGION'S MEDIA. A MORE EFFECTIVE STRATEGY WOULD BE TO POINTOUT AND CONTRADICT SPECIFIC INSTANCES OF ANTI-AMRICANISM WHICH SURFACE IN NEWS AND OPINION CONTENT, THEREBY PUTTING THE PRODUCERS (AND THEIR GOV MSTERS) ON THE DEFENSIVE.

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